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ABSTRACT

Determining the language skill deficits of learning-disabled students may be difficult. They have many appropriate language skills, but may miss the subtlety of language. This is exemplified by their lack of awareness of morphemes and the important information that less-stressed morphemes provide. Developing or selecting a program to improve their language skills requires consideration of students' competencies and needs. Structuring the language program involves four steps: (1) observe students' language demands within the social and academic environment, (2) make a list of the demands, (3) observe the students and rate their abilities regarding these competencies, and (4) compare all of the students' language competencies and target common language problems. Development of language skills calls for the use of language in natural situations, opportunities to explore language continuously, and generalization of skills to other settings. (JDD)

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Developing a Language Program for the Learning Disabled Student with a Language Disorder

A Paper Presented at the Sixty-sixth International Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children

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Developing a Language Program for the Learning Disabled Student with a Language Disorder

Within the last few years there has been more emphasis on the language problems of learning disabled students. Frequently, this emphasis has been on what students cannot do in a predetermined curriculum. This discrepancy evaluation process compares the students' functioning levels to a designated curriculum and identifies the skills the student lacks. Unfortunately, there may be little attention given to comparing students' language skills and the necessary skills for success in academic, work and social interactions (Simon, 1985).

Determining the language skill deficits of a learning disabled student may be difficult. Although a language deficit is present, it may be obscure. Such problems sometimes get shoved aside or ignored because they are undetected. For example, we may assume that a child who avoids conversation is shy, rather than considering the possibility that he/she does not understand what is being said or does not comprehend questions that are asked. We may misjudge a child who fights constantly. The child is assumed to have a behavior disorder. There is little or no consideration of the possibility that the child misunderstands what is said. Misinterpretation of a statement can make something negative out of a neutral comment. Take for example the joke adults like to play on

small children. "Oh, Sally...Look! You have garments all over you!" Since Sally does not know what the word garment means, she assumes from the context that there are bugs crawling on her and she begins screaming. We make wrong assumptions about a child's behavior when we fail to consider why behavior occurs.

How do we recognize a less than obvious language problem? We have a better chance of detecting problems if we become kidwatchers. learning disabled students have many appropriate language skills. But as stated previously, they may miss the subtlety of language. Not understanding the subtlety of language is exemplified by their understanding or lack of awareness of morphemes. A morpheme is the smallest unit of language that provides meaning. For example the "s" that makes a plural and "ed" that changes a verb to past tense are morphemes because they change the meaning of words. Often it can be observed that the learning disabled student drops an "s" or "ed" when speaking or writing. This occurs because morphemes have low inference. In other words, less emphasis is placed on the morpheme than on the root word. Sometimes the morpheme is barely audible and is not stressed as strongly as the root word, but it provides important information. Learning disabled persons may not pay attention to the less stressed morpheme and may not realize that it provides important information (Reid, 1988).

At the point when teachers realize some or all of their students have language problems, it is not unusual for teachers to be encouraged to look for help in publisher's catalogs that advertise new programs. Each is guaranteed to work, aid in I.E.P. objectives and comes with a complete set of reproducible lessons and mastery tests. Does this type of program work? Some probably help students perform better on worksheets and tests measuring the concepts the materials address. Most are based on assumptions about what children do not know about language, and ignore their competencies.

To decide if a published program will be useful to students, ask these questions. What language competencies do my students need? What language competencies do my students have? Remember that language is a tool for both learning and social interaction. Consequently, there are three more important questions to consider. When my students graduate from high school, will they need to get a job? To get and keep a job will my students be asked to circle nouns or put lines under the correct pictures? Will my students be judged on the basis of their ability to converse, understand directions, communicate ideas, accept and give feedback?

When developing a language program, the focus should be students' competencies and needs. In addition, language development should be a continuous, integrated process.

Structuring the language program is easy once four steps are taken:

1. Observe the students' language demands within the social and academic environment. In other words, give attention to what students need to be able to do: take turns in conversation, know how to listen, follow directions, use polite phrases and ask questions.

2. Make a list of these language demands.

3. Observe the students and rate their ability regarding these competencies.

4. Compare all of the students' language competencies and target common language problems.

At this point a language program can be developed based on skills the students have, those that need practice and those that need to be taught.

Situations that are as natural as possible should be provided for teaching and practicing skills. Make students aware of the importance of language skill. Generalization of skills occurs when attention is given to structuring opportunities to practice in the regular class and at home. These opportunities can occur by communicating to teachers and parents what skills are being taught and by providing specific suggestions for practice.

In general, language development occurs continuously. Give students the opportunity to explore and use language. They should be encouraged to become risk takers. As

teachers, we should develop our skills in kidwatching. We need to give attention to what our students say and observe their reactions to what they hear. This will provide indicators of the subtle language problems that may be present. We also need to focus on the language demands of our students' environment. How do they need to use language in peer interactions, teacher interactions, parent interactions, and work interactions? How do our students get information, seek clarification and negotiate? The assessment of their language competencies will be a guide in developing a language program fitted to the needs of students rather fitting students to a predetermined program. Finally, we should structure opportunities for students to use and refine their language skills (Bos & Vaughn, 1988).

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